

# ***An Hour in the Life of Stefan Zweig***

by

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translated by Jim McCarthy

*Petropolis, Brazil, February 22nd 1942. A room in the Zweigs' house. A large room with few furnishings. A desk covered in papers and envelopes, a bookshelf with a few books and a small table with an unfinished game of chess on it. Seated at the desk, Charlotte Elizabeth Altmann, Lotte, aged 35, has just finished reading a document. She has a worn, somewhat sad expression. She is wearing a summer dress. Standing next to her is Stefan Zweig, aged 60. Aged face with a worn out expression and a lost look. He has been listening whilst drinking a cup of tea. Silence.*

**LOTTE** Do you want me to read it again?

**ZWEIG** No.

**LOTTE** So you'll sign it as it is?

**ZWEIG** It's good as it is. I don't think it needs any more. What's the matter?

**LOTTE** Nothing. I thought perhaps...

**ZWEIG** What?

**LOTTE** Sorry, I'm a bit confused.

**ZWEIG** We've talked about it dozens of times.

**LOTTE** Yes, yes, I know. It's just that...Suddenly...*(She is quiet.)*

**ZWEIG** Suddenly you're afraid.

**LOTTE** I'm afraid.

**ZWEIG** *(Very calmly)* It will only be a moment. As I told you before. No longer than it takes a person to finish a cup of tea. *(He drinks.)*

**LOTTE** I know. I still can't help being afraid. The last few days I've told myself over and over that when the moment came I wouldn't hesitate, but now...

**ZWEIG** You know you don't have to do it. I don't want...

**LOTTE** No.

**ZWEIG** ...you to feel forced. If you decide not to do it...

**LOTTE** No, no. I want to do it.

**ZWEIG** ...You won't be short of money, if you want to carry on.

**LOTTE** Of course I want to do it. I've made up my mind. But let me be a little bit shaky at least. It's only natural, isn't it?

**ZWEIG** *(Resigned)* Yes.

**LOTTE** *(She moves closer to him, affectionately)* But it gives me strength to have you at my side. To know you're so determined.

**ZWEIG** Death doesn't frighten me. All I feel at the moment is sadness. I've enjoyed living. But life has turned into something sadder than death itself *(Silence.)*

**LOTTE** Do you want to rest a little?

**ZWEIG** No. Let's finish off. There can't be much left to do, no?

**LOTTE** *(Indicating a pile of envelopes and papers on the table)*  
This pile here.

**ZWEIG** I'd rather finish it now. That way we'll still have time for a walk in the garden. If you like. *(Lotte agrees)* It'll be a beautiful evening. Then we'll come home, lie down on the bed and everything will be finished.

**LOTTE** *(To herself)* Everything.

**ZWEIG** It'll be like a crossing.

**LOTTE** A crossing to where?

**ZWEIG** To a place where we leave pain behind.

**LOTTE** You think so?

**ZWEIG** What?

**LOTTE** You think pain will end with death?

**ZWEIG** Of course.

**LOTTE** How do you know we don't take it with us?

**ZWEIG** What?

**LOTTE** How do you know that after we're dead we don't carry on feeling the pain that tortures us now, that we'll escape from the complete sadness that our life has become?

*(Zweig shrugs. He doesn't know what to say.)*

**ZWEIG** Lotte, we can't know. Nobody can.

**LOTTE** If we do, what a disaster, no? Even when we're dead we wouldn't manage to be safe from *him*.

**ZWEIG** We said today we wouldn't talk about him. We'll never hear about him ever again.

**LOTTE** Sorry. I'm not as strong as you think.

**ZWEIG** Of course you are.

**LOTTE** No. I'm not. You're saying that to give me courage. But you know it's not true. If only I had half of Friderike's strength.

**ZWEIG** Why do you say that?

**LOTTE** Because if you'd stayed with her you'd never have decided to do this.

*(Zweig is stung by this. Silence.)*

**ZWEIG** There's nothing to be done about that.

**LOTTE** It's better if we talk about it. We're putting everything in order, let's clear this up too.

**ZWEIG** What?

**LOTTE** Do you think I haven't thought about it? Everything would have been different if you were still married to her.

**ZWEIG** It would all have been the same.

**LOTTE** No, my darling.

**ZWEIG** The war would be the same. Exile the same.

**LOTTE** Yes. On the surface, yes. Perhaps it would all be the same. The war, exile, persecution...Perhaps you and she would also have come to Brazil, even lived in this same house, but I'm certain there wouldn't be a bottle of poison waiting for you in the table drawer. (*Silence. Zweig says nothing.*) And to think it was she who chose me to be your secretary. You know why she did it? You can imagine, no?

**ZWEIG** She chose you because you were the best. She told me herself.

**LOTTE** (*Laughs sadly*) I remember it as though it happened today. There were a few candidates, perhaps six or seven of us. I remember a girl from Vienna, very young, very beautiful. She spoke four languages. We were all convinced she'd get the job. But Friderike chose me. She chose me because I was the ugliest.

**ZWEIG** Lotte, that's nonsense.

**LOTTE** It's true. It never entered her head that someone like me could break up your marriage.

**ZWEIG** You didn't break anything that wasn't already broken.

**LOTTE** Anyway, if it weren't for me sooner or later you'd have gone back to her.

**ZWEIG** You're wrong.

**LOTTE** I'm certain. You would have returned to her.

**ZWEIG** Why are you so certain?

**LOTTE** Because you still love her.

**ZWEIG** You're wrong again.

**LOTTE** No. I realised it when we met her in New York. The way you smiled at her, how you looked at her.

**ZWEIG** I'm still fond of her, it's true. But you have to understand. Love doesn't end suddenly. You can't wipe away twenty years of a shared life just by signing your name on some divorce papers.

**LOTTE** My darling, I'm not blaming you for anything. I understand. I'm not hurt or jealous. It's just...I can't explain...In New York I sometimes felt that I was being your lover, while she was really your wife. Wait. I'm saying this for my own sake, not for you. Again, I'm not

blaming you for anything. In any case, I blame myself. For not being able to offer you something strong that you could hang onto, something like a shelter in the midst of all this insanity. Sorry, I don't know how to express it any better...

**ZWEIG** You express it perfectly.

**LOTTE** I would've liked so much to know how to protect you from all this. To have avoided...At first, when...when I fell in love with you, this sounds selfish, I knew you'd grow old before me. And I was happy thinking that when the time came I would have to look after you. Instead it's been you who has had to look after me. I've not had the strength to do more than follow you.

*(Silence.)*

**ZWEIG** I've never heard you talk like this.

**LOTTE** I haven't talked like this before. It must be...*(She smiles)* the solemn occasion. The fact is that...it's difficult to accept that I've played such a sad part in your life.

**ZWEIG** Lotte, how can you say that?

**LOTTE** No...I mean...At times I've come to feel...like the crippled girl in your novel. The one for whom the lieutenant feels only pity.

**ZWEIG** What I feel for you is not pity.

**LOTTE** ...I know, I know...I've never felt so loved as when I'm at your side. But somehow I wanted to return that love and I didn't know how. If there had been a single time when I could have truly helped you, been able to protect you from some danger, I don't know...that would've helped me not to feel a burden.

*(Silence.)*

**ZWEIG** I don't know how you can be so hard on yourself. But perhaps I do. I can't help feeling guilty too, for having dragged you to this corner of the end of the world.

**LOTTE** You didn't drag me. I followed you because I love you.

**ZWEIG** And still you say you've done nothing for me. I thought Brazil would be the start of our new life but it turns out to be journey's end. And at the end of it all is you, with me. Nobody else would've been able to do what you're willing to do.

**LOTTE** I wouldn't know how to carry on living without you. But I'd have wanted to be as strong as Friderike.

**ZWEIG** Let's not talk about her. She's far away.

**LOTTE** No. She's very close. She's been close all these years. Besides, she...gave me something for you.

**ZWEIG** Friderike? Something for me? How?

**LOTTE** In New York.

**ZWEIG** And you've kept it all this time? What is it?

**LOTTE** You'll know very soon. She asked me to give it you...at the final moment. It will help you. (*Silence. Zweig watches her.*) What?

**ZWEIG** You see I was right.

**LOTTE** When?

**ZWEIG** When I said you were a strong woman.